HAVELOCK ELLIS

1859-1939

HOW shall we estimate the debt we owe to Havelock Ellis? If in seeking an answer to that question we recall inevitably his monumental *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, it is not from any wish to underrate the extent or the diversity of the other subjects over which his intellect ranged to the enduring benefit of this and succeeding generations. But this work, one of the greatest contributions to knowledge ever made by a single man, epitomizes as none other of his writings the special qualities of his genius. It is possible to say, turning the pages now, that here is a complete and balanced account of the state of knowledge and opinion at the time when they were written. These are works that can never be superseded or become out of date. They mark, precisely and in detail, a stage in our cultural progress. We know that knowledge will advance, facts will be added, theories will be discarded; but both as an indispensable preliminary to more recent writings and as an exact record of the facts as they were known up to and including the beginning of this century the *Studies* are as indispensable to the serious student as when they first disturbed the complacency of a hostile world.

But it is to belittle the fundamental achievement of Havelock Ellis to regard him merely as an artist, scholar and interpreter. Havelock Ellis was a revolutionist. He challenged, not aggressively but by the character and consistent trend of his literary output, the prevalent assumptions in his society that ignorance was a virtue to be cultivated for its own sake, that prudery was equivalent to a becoming modesty, and that sexual physiology, psychology and pathology were obscenities tricked out to look like science. The Recorder spoke for most of his contemporaries when, in summing up the case against Havelock Ellis's publisher, he said: "I am willing to believe that in acting as you did you might at the first outset perhaps have been gulled into the belief that somebody might say that this was a scientific work. But it is impossible for anybody with a head on his shoulders to open the book without seeing that it is a pretence and a sham, and that it is merely entered into for the purpose of selling this obscene publication." That to-day we can recognize this judgment for the barbarism that it was is part of the debt that we owe to Havelock Ellis. He made no counter-attack, he simply went on with his self-prescribed task. "The decision I have been forced to reach," he wrote at the time, "seems inevitable. To wrestle in the public arena for freedom of speech is a noble task which may be worthily undertaken by any man who can devote to it the best energies of his life. It is not, however, a task which I ever contemplated. I am a student and my path has long been marked out. I may be forced to pursue it under unfavourable conditions, but I do not intend that any consideration should induce me to swerve from it, nor do I intend to injure my work or distort my vision of life by entering upon any struggle. . . . I insist upon doing my own work in my own way." And so he did, and in the process he initiated a social revolution which will not be complete until it has resulted in a transformation of the moral attitudes of a whole society.

Dr. C. P. Blacker writes: In Havelock Ellis's death, the cause of eugenics has lost one of its most balanced, forceful and influential supporters. But of this *Society's* policy he has sometimes been critical.

With our qualified support of birth control he has always been in sympathy and to our pre-marital health schedules he accorded, on several occasions, welcome public praise.

But of one aspect of our policy he strongly disapproved, namely our approach to the problem of eugenic sterilization. He opposed our efforts to get the measure formally

legalized for persons broadly described as "compos mentis." In several letters to me, he expressed strong dissent from the view that the voluntary sterilization on good eugenic grounds of a mentally normal person was illegal. It was the business, he said, of the lawyers to find ambiguities and uncertainties in the law. He urged the *Society* to try by all the means at its disposal to encourage the judicious employment of voluntary sterilization and thereby to get it accepted as part of normal medical practice, rather than to challenge the organized forces of the opposition by seeking to legalize it by Act of Parliament. A good precedent for the course he advocated is the practice of blood-transfusion. This has been widely adopted without afterthoughts as to the legality, under Section 20 of the Offences Against the Person Act, of puncturing the vein of the donor. Dr. Ellis gave his view of the legal position in a memorandum, wherein he contended that, instead of forming a committee to legalize voluntary sterilization, the *Society* would be less harmfully employed in establishing one to legalize voluntary decapillation—i.e. the process of having one's hair cut!

The resort to Parliament was, in his view, open to the serious danger that a carefully planned Bill might well emerge from the "mangle" of Parliamentary debate so modified as to bear but a small resemblance to the Bill which had gone in. Many unnecessary and unwieldy safeguards might be introduced and the practice might be so bound up with red tape that the result would, in his words, be "to sterilize sterilization."

His view has been borne out to the extent that, despite much effort on our part and on that of others, the unanimous recommendation of an influential and representative inter-departmental committee has for five years been ignored.

Mature consideration of Dr. Havelock Ellis's contentions in this matter has convinced me of their fundamental soundness. An approach to the problem is now being made along lines of which he would have approved.

A feature of his character which I much respected, as well as on occasions regretted, was his uncompromising refusal to allow himself to be lionized. On one occasion I tried hard to persuade him to give a Galton Lecture. I went as far as to offer to have him conveyed to and from his home by car! But with the utmost courtesy and firmness he refused.

To myself and to everyone else who approached him, he was invariably helpful and encouraging; and from my talks with him I derived, even more strongly than from the reading of his books, a sense of the wisdom of his judgment and of the balance and gentleness of his character.

Dr. Russell Brain writes: It would need a history of English morals to explain the nuances of the word "purity," but it is significant that a word which in the first instance implies freedom from alien elements should have come to mean freedom from sexual feelings produced by repression and extolled as a virtue. If to-day the word "purity" in this sense is hardly heard outside certain religious circles and even there induces a slightly uncomfortable self-consciousness we owe it to Havelock Ellis more than to anyone else. And yet if the word could be rehabilitated there is no one to whom it could be applied more aptly. He was a new type of man, one of the first in our era to view sex without the emotion of guilt. He was free from alien elements because to him there were none. We who come after him are fortunate that his gifts as an artist and a writer enabled him to emancipate others as well as himself.

Mr. Alec Craig writes: After his severe illness last year Havelock Ellis, I believe, realized that the end was not far off. At any rate he employed the small measure of his recovered health and strength in setting his affairs in order.

One task was the disposal of his extensive collection of books. I say "collection of books" rather than "library" because Havelock Ellis had little of the bibliophile about him. Although he possessed hundreds of volumes from all over the world he appeared to care little for books as books. He kept them in no formal order but relied

on his remarkable memory to guide him to any reference he required. It was in connection with this disposal that I was privileged to see something of him at a time when his health made him more of a recluse than ever. He asked me to help in disposing of his rarer sexological books, and in carrying out his wishes with regard to some hundred volumes I had to visit him both at his house at Herne Hill and at his country cottage near Hayward's Heath. Soon after he gave up both places and retired to Suffolk, a county in which many of his family had lived. The hope that he would there spend a long and tranquil evening to his life has unhappily been disappointed.

I had met him previously in connection with my own work and received most generous assistance including loans of books and little gifts of pamphlets.

His bodily weakness did not impair the interest of his conversation. Over lunch one sunny day at Hayward's Heath he recalled his childhood and how he once stole pennies to buy pears, his favourite fruit. On another occasion he talked about his voyages, ending up by saying: "I liked the sailing ships best." He spoke very sadly of Edward Carpenter's last days of infirmity and mentioned that Mrs. Ellis used to go and stay with him, adding (characteristically): "But I would never stay away anywhere."

But there was no trace of "anecdotage" in his talk. He showed a keen appreciation of present trends and controversies. Only about the Surrealists he once shook his head in a puzzled way and said: "They are beyond me." He displayed not the least bitterness with regard to the indignities to which his work had been subjected, though he quite realized that the law which had in effect condemned him as a common pornographer was unchanged and unrepentant and ready to treat in a similar fashion younger writers who are sincerely striving to carry on his work. He seemed to have a simple and complete faith in the ultimate triumph of reason and intellectual freedom.

Major Leonard Darwin writes: When studying the "Contents" of the first volume of the EUGENICS REVIEW, namely that for 1909-10, the fourth name on the list of authors is seen to be that of Havelock Ellis, the subject dealt with being the sterilization of the unfit. Is there any other man in England who can now point to a like continuous and consistent advocacy for thirty years of this measure of eugenic reform? I was not then even a member of our *Society*, and possibly on that account I am sorry to have to own that I never became personally acquainted with this pioneer of our cause. I can only recall that on one occasion I accidentally misrepresented his views, with the result that I received a kindly and courteous letter pointing out my error. I well knew the value of his published works, and cannot but regret that I did not come under his personal influence. Some of those whose names appear on the above-mentioned page are still with us, I am glad to say—Inge, Tredgold, and Poulton—but the losses we have sustained, however inevitable, are grievous. The works of Havelock Ellis will remain with us permanently to help us in our long and arduous campaign.

Lord Horder writes: The eugenics cause has lost a valiant and sturdy supporter in the death of the veteran Havelock Ellis. For half a century his work, both in its contributions to sexology and in the more general advocacy which his exceptional literary gifts gave to sociological progress, has greatly strengthened the activities of our *Society*.

It has been given to few men or women to see their efforts on behalf of their fellows so rounded off before they joined the great majority. Ellis knew this and enjoyed a quiet satisfaction from reflecting upon it. Over and above his public work there stands to his credit an enormous number of private and personal efforts made in connection with co-workers in the same field. To these he was a constant source of encouragement, and by them especially he will be greatly missed.